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ABSTRACT

The observations gleaned from the experiences of two editors of speech communication journals served as the basis for the identification of the limitations inherent in research studies employing qualitative methods. Among their observations are the following: (1) qualitative research remains a relatively ill defined descriptor which embodies a wide range of research activity; (2) because qualitative research means different things to different people, evaluators of qualitative studies bring to bear radically different expectations, sets of evaluative criteria, and predispositions regarding format and style of presentation; (3) given the uneasiness over the appropriate standards for the execution and reporting of qualitative studies, reviewers tend to be more conservative in their estimation of a manuscript's worth and less willing to give specific guidance for revising the manuscript; and (4) based on the number of quality submissions to the journals, there is a paucity of qualitative research that merits publication. (HOD)

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EVALUATING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: RECOGNIZING OUR PERSONAL JUDGMENTS

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Evaluating Qualitative Research:

Recognizing Our Personal Judgments

When we were invited to participate on this panel, the invitation was for a paper which focused on the presentation of formats for writing qualitative journal articles. While we graciously accepted the invitation to participate, we promptly shifted the thrust of our remarks to the evaluation of qualitative research. We did this for two primary reasons. First, neither of us has done enough writing of qualitatively-oriented journal articles to provide us with the credentials to offer directives for manuscript preparation. Second, our experiences to date suggest that even if we felt qualified to tell you how you should write-up your research, such explanations are probably premature, and certainly beyong the scope of this paper. Formats for the presentation of qualitative studies of communication topics are in an early stage of evolution, and virtually anything which we might offer as good advice today, might be bad advice by the time this group meets next year in Honolulu.

What we do feel qualified to share with you today is our collective experience as editors of two scholarly journals which are not only receptive to the publication of qualitative studies, but are actively encouraging this form of inquiry within the communication discipline. We have the unique vantage point of seeing both the kind of qualitative research being submitted for publication consideration, and the range of responses of the reviewers to that research. And it is the set of observations gleaned from this perspective which we wish to contribute to

this forum.

Given that we all share a common interest in the development of a research tradition that employs qualitative methods, our intent is to identify a set of problems which we believe holds the potential for retarding that development. The list is by no means exhaustive, but rather is suggestive of the limitations inherent in the normal evolution of an emerging genre of research.

1. Qualitative research remains a relatively ill-defined descriptor which embodies a wide range of research activity.

Qualitative research has its roots in a variety of academic disciplines, reflecting an enormous range of philosophical orientations, methodological approaches, and studies of various magnitudes. The qualitative label has been used to describe both the study of short-term dyadic communication within a single family dwelling and the analysis of an entire society over a period of many months or even years. What is seen as appropriate methods and procedures for one researcher may be viewed as totally inappropriate by another. There are no clear-cut, easily-identifiable statistical tests to help establish criterion measures nor provide evidence of defensible rigor. Rather, the qualitative researcher must provide a convincing argument that the approach chosen and interpretations presented are appropriate and sound. The nature and scope of the methods employed in qualitative research studies have been recently organized into a working taxonomy (Husband, 1984). The organizational scheme of the taxonomy argues that qualitative studies are guided first by research strategies. Husband cites a total of five: 1) naturalistic inquiry; 2) contextualization; 3) maximized comparisons; 4) sensitizing concepts; and 5) analytic induction. The literature from which these

strategies are drawn suggest that "the quality and comprehensiveness of studies to a significant degree depends upon the number of different strategies employed and the completeness of follow through in using any given strategy" (Husband, p. 8). In other words, the greater the number and the more complete the strategies are, the greater the chance of success.

The "methods" of qualitative research are distinguished from the "strategies" in that they represent the specific procedures for activating the underlying strategies. Here Husband lists what he considers to be the six major methodologies which are being employed in qualitative studies: 1) participant observation, 2) the case study, 3) conversational analysis, 4) historical and life history, 5) unobtrusive measures, and 6) interviewing (p. 14). But even before the author begins to lead the reader through a discussion of each of the major methods he offers the following caveat: "Although presented as such, it should be noted that these do not represent distinct 'clean' categories of qualitative methods. Indeed, a significant problem with any discussion of qualitative studies at the methodological level has been the considerable interwining of methodologies and their descriptions to the point of making them indistinguishable" (p. 14-15). Any taxonomy which must begin with a disclaimer of this magnitude provides ample evidence of the difficulty inherent in separating out the research activites subsumed under the rubric "Qualitative Studies." The first problem, then, is one of definition. People view the appropriate province and methods of quantitative studies differently.

2. <u>Because qualitative research means different things to different people, evaluators of qualitative studies bring to bear radically different expectations, sets of evaluative criteria, and predispositions regarding format and style of presentation</u>.

In their thought-provoking essay on the logic and aims of qualitative research, Christians and Carey (1981) explain that in our attempt to develop an alternative to the natural science model of the social sciences, more humanistically-oriented scholars have spawned a number of traditions: critical theory, interpretive social science, hermeneutics, cultural science, or in more general terms, quantitative studies. "These names point to important differences of outlook: differences in philosophical orientation, national tradition, research priorities, and ideological stances" (p. 344). In more mundane terms, individuals representing different schools of thought not only adhere to certain ideosyncratic approaches to doing their own work, but impose these particular values on the work of others. Although Christians and Carey argue that what distinguishes qualitative approaches from the tradition of quantitative research is not whether a manuscript reports numbers, there are those among us who would make evaluative decisions solely on the presence or absence of numbers, regardless of their mode of presentation or intent. Because of an apparent aversion to statistical representations of any kind, some humanistic scholars bring a negative predisposition to their evaluation of qualitative studies which include summary tables of reported observations or which use percentages or other numerical information as the basis for arguments advanced.

Similar biases exist regarding the reportage of historical or background information as an integral part of the research. Again Christians and Carey point out that there exists a general misconception regarding the relationship between what is termed "historical analysis" and qualitative studies. Some scholars feel that the qualitative research has an obligation to place the observed phenomena within an historical

context, while other scholars view the inclusion of such information as a guise for warmed over historiography. The subtle distinction suggested by Christians and Carey is that "Qualitative studies emulate historical explanation as method, not history as subject" (p. 345). Unfortunately, this subtlety is sometimes lost on the reviewers whose personal bias prompts a negative signal response. There is also a debate being waged at present regarding the appropriateness of well-established conventions of scientific writing for the emerging study of "organizational cultures." The point of conflict appears to focus on whether fictional writing affords a scholarly mode of discourse for advancing claims and constructing a cultural account. While these examples are merely suggestive of the problem, they help us to illustrate that different reviewers bring radically different expectations to the evaluation process. A job of the editor is to be conscious of, and sensitive to, the role these biases play in the determination of what constitutes quality scholarship.

3. Given a certain uneasiness which pervades our discipline with regard to the appropriate standards for the execution and reporting of qualitative studies, reviewers tend to be (1) more conservative in their estimation of a manuscript's worth, and (2) less willing to give specific guidance for revising the manuscript.

Due largely to the absence of a set of clear directives which evolve from a well-established research tradition, some reviewers are hesitant to vote acceptance on manuscripts which are different from work with which they have direct familiarity. Such timidity is understandable. The publication of qualitative studies which are subsequently ridiculed for lacking methodological rigor and the standards associated with quality scholarship can prove extremely injurious to a fledgling research genre (as well as the journals in which they appear). As editors, we share their concern.

This hesitancy and uneasiness is also reflected in the recommendations for revision contained in some of the manuscript critiques. Just as reviewers are reluctant to vote in favor of accepting a manuscript which they feel may reflect substandard scholarship, some critics are hesitant to offer specific guidance for improving the paper. It is almost as though the reviewer were saying, "This isn't it, and I'm not exactly sure what you should do about it, but I'll know it when I see it." We, as editors, are often no better prepared to offer concrete advice.

Part of the problem, of course, is that there have been few qualitative articles published within our communication journals, and hence writers are provided with a limited number of models to guide the preparation of their own research reports. One could argue that communication scholars who are attempting to do qualitative work are caught up in a classic "Catch 22." That is, they cannot get their research published because it does not meet acceptable standards, and they cannot learn what standards (or conventions) are expected because there are so few studies in print. But lest the author who has had his or her manuscript rejected feels that fault lies solely with the evaluator, let us shift our attention to what we consider to be the most serious problem.

4. Based on the number of quality submissions to JOB and CSMC during our terms as editors, there is a paucity of qualitative research which merits publication.

Having identified those potential problems which we see as inherent in the review process of our journals, the fact remains that there are still few among us who are well-prepared to do high quality qualitative scholarship. We take no satisfaction in stating that this is the observation in which we have the greatest confidence. This is not intended as an indictment, but as an expression of concern for all of us who are committed to the advancement of qualitative study.

If we review the level of quantitative scholarship reflected in our journals during the 1950s and 60s there is little difficulty identifying experimental studies which would never achieve publication were they to be submitted to the same journals today. Communication was not the birthplace of those early experimental designs and statistical measures. We were, for the most part, ill-prepared for the first wave of quantitative research which swept across our discipline. And so it is today with the first wave of qualitative studies. Despite the long and distinguished heritage of qualitative research, it is new to our discipline. Support for this position is found in the rejected qualitative manuscripts that we have read. Let us describe the structure of the manuscript which typifies this group.

More often than not the paper begins with some kind of introduction to qualitative inquiry which attempts to convey the impression that qualitative research is not only very new but must be immediately defended as being reputable and deserving of consideration. To demonstrate to the reader that others share this view of legitimacy, the author then provides a review of selected methodology texts such as those by Bogdan and Taylor (1975), Bruyn (1966), Filstead (1970), Berger (1963), Garfinkel (1967), Denzin (1970), Geertz (1973), Spradley (1980), Leiter (1980), Schwartz & Jacobs (1979), etc., etc. As much as a third or more of the manuscript may be devoted to this literature review which serves more as a statement of defense than a foundation for the study itself. Theory and method are often fused together, and the procedures employed by the researcher of the investigation appear disconnected from the literature review. Often the procedures are not clearly explicated, and the subsequent link with the results section is cloudy at best. The interpretation which is central to the qualitative approach may, in fact, be little more than transitions between chunks of transcriptions. The concluding statements are

interesting, but the reader does not know how the author arrived at the conclusions presented. Admittedly, this is an overgeneralization, but those of you who have recommended the rejection of such manuscripts will recognize this characterization.

There are probably a host of reasons for explaining our current "state of the art," but we will offer only a few. It seems clear that the writers of some of the qualitative manuscripts we receive have a limited literary background. That is, they are not well-grounded in the humanities and they fail to bring a humanistic perspective to their work. All too often the manuscripts take the form of logical positivism. The writing suggests that the author's formal academic preparation was leading toward quantitative approaches. Perhaps a fear of statistics or the recent "discovery" of qualitative research inspired the author to shift directions without a corresponding return to the origins of the qualitative tradition. It may also be the case that at some schools, the graduate students are more advanced in their pursuit of qualitative approaches than the faculty who direct their work. This might explain the shock some young scholars express when told that their research fails to meet minimum publication standards.

Not knowing exactly how to go about doing good qualitative inquiry, the researcher sometimes initiates the project with a set of pre-conceived expectations (hypotheses) which guide both the process of selective observation and the preparation of the research report. The explanatory power of the discussion is marred by the search for quotations or behaviors that represent "typical" activity and makes for interesting reading. Often that which makes for a good story is not necessarily a valid representation of the observations. Yet, Michael Pacanowsky (1984) has built a convincing argument for artistic ethnographies which present results in fictional rather than analytic terms. For others the exclusion

of the mundane in favor of the "good stuff" is a natural temptation which signals a warning to the reader.

Placed within the context of our own discipline, qualitative research is still in its infancy. It will require continued nurturing and critical response. In both the preparation and evaluation of qualitative research we must recognize our personal judgments. Improving the quality of these judgments will foster the doing of creative scholarship which will eventually keep pace with all the talking about doing qualitative research.

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